

NOTES ON THE PRESIDENT'S SPEECH OF NOVEMBER 3, 1969

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Extra Copy
Last night the President picked up a fallen standard, and proclaimed Nixon's War. On a closer look, the war he proposes to continue is disarmingly close to Johnson's War: A commitment to the pursuit in Vietnam of unattainable ends, open-ended in time, cost, and the use of American fire-power against Vietnamese. ①

The cost in U.S. troops deployed and U.S. casualties in any one year, be less than the levels of recent years, at least so long as a "lull" persists. Yet why should Hanoi continue to refrain from its own program of "maximum pressure", in the face of the President's policy? On the contrary, every aspect of that policy -- the implicit promise of indefinite continuation of U.S. air and logistic support to a narrow-based, military regime, the unconditional political support for that regime, the apparently slow and indefinite program of withdrawal even of ground combat troops -- all combine to give Hanoi maximum incentive to increase our own casualties to change one or more of those decisions.

Hanoi leadership will have the capability to inflict those casualties, perhaps at a high price to themselves; all past behavior reveals that they will pay that price. What we have to look forward to from this policy is a future like the past, of lulls and "Tets", a cycle of VC inactivity and activity, with no clear limit to the deaths we suffer or inflict. Indeed, there is no hint in the President's speech -- with its emphasis on the vital interests that would be risked by extrication and its silence on the values lost by continuation of our involvement -- that he recognizes any limit at all to the total price he would be willing to pay in American lives, treasure and cohesion to avoid or postpone the possible unfavorable consequences of American disengagement. ②

→ Nixon's description of the course leading to the unconditional withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam as a "popular and easy course" is spurious. In fact, if the way out of Vietnam had ever been perceived as unequivocally popular, easy and politically safe over the last 20 years of our involvement, it would surely have recommended itself in one or another crisis as the course to follow. The fact is that now as in the past, getting out is seen as the hard, uncertain and politically dangerous course compared to the better known and more controllable risks of staying in -- that is, of postponing a decision to disengage -- "one more year." ③

A decision to withdraw totally within, say, one year, brings within the horizon of political foresight such possible consequences as Communist takeover, political reprisals, and ensuing recrimination within the United States. Perhaps the only time that an American President could bring himself to accept these risks (when the alternative of continuing the war and at least postponing any such reckoning looked militarily viable) would be when he could claim to be cutting losses incurred entirely by a predecessor.

The President implies that the advice he received early in his term to close out "Johnson's War" was politically cynical; yet in practical terms, it might have pointed the most promising way out of this war, in the interest of all Americans and most Vietnamese.

The most disheartening and ominous aspect of his speech was the President's willingness to accept the appellation, "Nixon's War." All recent experience suggests that for a President to allow himself to become personally identified with the course of this conflict is to threaten its indefinite prolongation, at least during his Administration.

Equally ominous is the notion that "peace" is to be "won", and by us: that it must be "America's peace". Although the President does not, in fact, specify America's aims in Vietnam in any detail, his policy appears designed, still, to win an American victory: not a victory so ambitious as sometimes conceived in the past, but still, terms of peace that would clearly be recognized as defeat by the opposing side. Yet neither his speech nor any other evidence available suggests any basis for believing that the Hanoi leadership and their followers will ever stop fighting in acceptance of those terms.

What will happen assuming they do fight on?

The President's military advisors have always told him that the most to be hoped for in any program of reequipping and training the Vietnamese armed forces is that they will be able to hold their own against VC forces alone, perhaps with some level of North Vietnamese "fillers"; and even that cannot be achieved until 1972. They have held out no hope that these forces will be able to confront successfully any sizable number of North Vietnamese regular forces at any time in the future, without U.S. air and logistical support. Indeed, at no point in his speech does the President refer to a possibility that the U.S. would ever be able to withdraw such support entirely. The

policy he offers supposes an indefinite commitment of 100-200 thousand U.S. military personnel subject to risk and engaged in killing Vietnamese.

The only clear criticism of past policy within South Vietnam that emerges is the earlier neglect of the equipping and training of Vietnamese forces, a policy that was changed to the present one not under Nixon but in the last six months of the preceding administration, coincident with General Abrams' taking command.

"Vietnamization", of course, is a concept that goes back well before the last half year of the Johnson administration. The impending failure of a policy of relying entirely upon the Vietnamese forces -- trained and equipped by Americans since 1954 -- led the JCS to recommend the commitment of American ground troops as early as 1961, although opposing guerrilla forces were miniscule by later standards. The next three years saw, instead, a more costly and urgent program of "Vietnamization", supplemented by American advisors. Not only were the opposing forces weaker throughout this period than at present, but the military leadership of the Vietnamese armed force was generally better, and the political leadership (up to 1963), for all its fatal flaws, was more nationalistic, respected, and efficient, than any since. Yet, American troops were committed to Vietnam in 1965 when that program too was about to collapse.

There is a clear contradiction between the President's description of his "plan" for an "orderly, scheduled timetable" of complete withdrawal of U.S. ground combat forces and his numerous references to three factors on which future "decisions" governing the rate of withdrawal would be conditioned: progress in Paris, enemy activity in South Vietnam, and improvement in the South Vietnamese forces. If our rate of withdrawal is indeed to be determined by three such factors -- over which we have little or no control, and which in the past we have proven unable even to predict realistically -- what can be the meaning of references to a timetable?

Some sense might be made of this apparent contradiction if one inferred that the President had arrived at a private, "maximum-length," conservative timetable, which might only be speeded up by events. But in that case, why keep it a secret? To announce it, and to assert its political feasibility, would be to increase, not to "remove", incentives for the opponent to negotiate an agreement for earlier withdrawal. Why worry about their "moving in" after our forces have withdrawn if our withdrawal is to be predicated upon the ability of the South Vietnamese forces to withstand such a test? Or is it that the President estimates

that the rate his advisors have assured him would be militarily safe is so slow and uncertain that to reveal it would lead to immediate political challenge at home and military challenge in Vietnam? In that case -- which, unhappily, seems most likely -- present secrecy only postpones those challenges.

The President describes "only two choices open to us if we want to end the war;" a "precipitate" withdrawal of all Americans or a slow, contingent reduction of forces with no definite end. Yet, in fact, virtually all of the proposals recently heard within Congress for bringing our involvement to a definite conclusion lie between the two courses he mentions, since not one of them can justly be said to call for "precipitate" withdrawal.

Nixon worries, as did his predecessors, about a domestic political "hang-over" from withdrawal: after immediate relief, "inevitable remorse and decisive recrimination would scar our spirit as a people" as "we saw the consequences of what we had done". His solution remains that of his predecessors: to postpone such painful "withdrawal symptoms" simply by continuing the war, with its cost in American and Vietnamese lives. That is the course of the addict; it may be the major hidden basis for our Government's addiction to this war over so many years and so many disappointments. It is not, as he presents it, the hard, courageous way to address this real problem, but the politically easy way, for the short run: easier than admitting past mistakes and facing painful consequences. It is not "the right way."

It seems clear that the President believes this to be a just war, one he would feel dishonored to disown. In his speech, he discusses the consequences of disengagement in emotional words -- "defeat...betrayal...humiliation" -- that warn of years' more war. He implies a sense of U. S. responsibility for political developments in South Vietnam that can be discharged only by indefinite combat engagement. His plan for "winning a just peace" is a plan for continuing United States involvement indefinitely, not at all a plan for ending it.

It is a policy that must goad the Hanoi leadership to challenge it by increasing the pressure of United States casualties; to which the President promises to respond by re-escalation, against all past evidence (and consistent, reliable intelligence predictions) that this would neither deter nor end such pressure. In fact, we have heard a plan not only for continuing the war but for returning it to levels -- in firepower, commitment of prestige, destruction inflicted -- recently abandoned. It is a plan and a speech we might have heard, without surprise, from Johnson, Rusk or Rostow: indeed, we have, many times.

Johnson's War lives.